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AUTHOR James, Richard; Etheridge, George
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ABSTRACT

In an effort to examine the effectiveness of commercially produced parent education programs, a child management and communication class given for Memphis, Tennessee, inner city parents is evaluated in this paper. The program, sponsored by the Mid-South Teacher Corps Project, utilized two models: (1) Becker's 1971 "Parents Are Teachers: A Child Management Program," which is devoted to behavior management techniques and has been used extensively with low socioeconomic status parents; and (2) Dinkmeyer's and McKay's 1976 "Systematic Training for Effective Parenting: STEP," a model that is based on Rudolph Dreikur's philosophy of child training, emphasizes sequential development of communication skills, and has been used with mostly middle class parents. Due to what the authors perceive to be mistakes on the part of the trainers, the initial enrollment of twenty-five parents decreased to only four by the third session. One problem identified is that initial sessions were not sufficiently directed toward parents' specific concerns. The strictly sequenced approach of the Becker program model was found to be only marginally useful. Even greater difficulties were encountered in using the second model. Recommendations are offered for adapting these two models for use with low socioeconomic status parents and for enhancing the effectiveness of parenting programs in general. It is concluded that "pre-packaged" parenting programs present so many problems that it is more practical for trainers to design their own program to fit a given situation. (GC)

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TRAINING FOR INNER CITY PARENTS IN CHILD REARING: WHY FRIED CHICKEN FRANCHISES FOR PARENTING DON'T WORK

by

Dr. Richard James
Department of Guidance and Personnel Services
Memphis State University

Dr. George Etheridge
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Memphis State University

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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Introduction

Parent education, in the sense of providing information and assistance to parents in rearing their children has existed for centuries (Hendrickson, 1963). However, in the past twenty years it has become big business. The slick backed, well mediated and commercially produced parent education programs have been rolling off the presses and into every community in America.

A variety of programs purporting to do everything but bottle feed one's children have been placed in the public domain. The following sample of programs may give one an idea of how prevasive parenting programs have become:

. Parents are Teacher (Becker, 1963):

. Children: The Challenge (Dreikers, 1964):

. Between Parent and Child (Ginnott, 1965):

. How To Parent (Dotson, 1970):

. Parent Effectivenss Training: The Test Way to Raise Responsible Children (Gordon, 1970):

. Natural Parenthood: Raising Your Child Without a Script (Leshan, 1970):

. Parents/Children/Discipline: A Positive Approach (Madsen and Madsen, 1972):

. The Art of Parenting (Wagonseller, et. al., 1977):

. Practical Education for Parenting (Hamdorf, 1978):

These programs have claimed much but little empirical research

has been done to support their efficacy. Yet, the amount of money, time and energy devoted to such programs by parents and professionals seems to indicate a rather wide and unconditional acceptance. The authors wonder if the programs are like the metaphorical fried chicken franchise that promises a hearty meal, looks good in the advertisements, smells good in the store, but only turns out to be necks and wings when the bucket is opened.

The foregoing concern seems doubly appropriate when the programs are considered for use with non-middle class, minority or culturally different parents. Do they work for parents who may not have the same family patterns, values and verbal skills that such programs promote? In particular, do they work for inner city Black parents who have myriads of problems that affect their everyday lives. This paper seeks to examine this question and to explore alternatives that human service specialists may seek to provide to inner city parents.

Background

A community needs assessment of the population in the Memphis inner city target schools of the Mid-South Teacher Corps Project revealed that parents whose children attended the target schools were highly interested in being provided training in a range of self-development and parenting skills. In response to the community needs assessment, the Mid-South Teacher Corps Project organized and sponsored several different programs for

parents: a self-development and career development class; a child management and communications class; an exercise class; and an arts and crafts class. This paper reports on the child management and communication class, hereafter referred to as the parenting program.

The writers - one a guidance counselor who specializes in elementary school counseling, and the other, an educational psychologist who specializes in early childhood education, were asked to develop the parenting program. Both writers have had extensive experience in working with broad socio-economic cross sections of parents and in conducting parent groups in the Midwest and South.

Basic Considerations of Program Design

Research on parent groups (Auerbach, 1968) and the writers experiences have shown that:

1. Eight to ten weeks are necessary for developing parenting skills. This length is not so long that it overwhelms the time commitments of most parents.
2. Each meeting should be 1 1/2 to 2 hours.
3. Meetings should be more than the trainer giving information. Each meeting should involve the parents in actively doing something with the information.
4. After each meeting, parents should have something to take home, think about, try and bring back to the next meeting.

5. Parents are adults, not children, and need to be respected and treated as adult co-equals with the trainers.
6. Creature comforts such as chairs, lighting, heating, refreshments need to be attended.

With the above broad guidelines in mind, a ten week, two hour per week parenting program was designed. The program was based on Becker's (1971) Parents Are Teachers: A Child Management Program and Dinkmeyer and McKay's (1976) Systematic Training for Effective Parenting: STEP. These are both nationally known parenting programs that are widely used across the country. The Becker program is written in a programmed text format, uses uncomplicated language, is devoted entirely to behavior management techniques and has been used with low socio-economic parents. Dinkmeyer and McKay's program is based on Rudolph Dreikurs philosophy of child training, has a heavy emphasis on sequential development of communication skills and has been used with many groups of parents, albeit, mostly middle class.

The programs were selected because they stressed the content areas (child management and communication) in which the target parents had requested training, were nationally known and commerically available to all communities, and fit the entering experiences and biases of the trainers. That is, people who may be living a marginal economic existence, are poorly housed, ill fed, under educated and in poor health do have much of a history of success with verbal abstract notions or delay of

gratification and even less patience or functional daily usage for such practices. Such parents seem to want approaches that yield rather immediate success, use direct approaches to solving problems and do not require a lot of "fancy talk." The trainers felt the Becker program met this criteria. It was further assumed that once the parents had experienced successes in building the kinds of behaviors they wanted from their children that they would "stick with the class" and be more willing to begin working on childrearing skills that are more indirect and have long term rather than immediate pay-offs as typified in the communication skills presented by the Dinkmeyer and McKay program.

Overall, the program was designed to teach parents behavior management skills which would allow them to experience rather immediate success in building the kind of behaviors they wanted in their child. Once these skills were well on the way to being mastered, the program would begin teaching communication and problem solving skills. It is important to note that the trainers and Teacher Corps were not trying to mold parents into being "middle class white folks" as some programs would seem to promote. Rather, in respect to the parents' culture and family practices, the trainers' goal was to teach idiosyncratic needs and would allow them to get more of what they wanted more often and for more years.

Recruitment

One of the thorniest problems in starting a parent training program is recruitment. Since the program was being sponsored by

Teacher Corps and since Teacher Corps has a community council made up of elected respresentatives who live in the target community, the community council was given the primary job of recruitment. This initially involved the writers preparing a one page handout describing the program and announcing the program's first meeting time and place. The community council arranged for the handouts to be sent home from school via the children, as well as using the handouts as an information guide for making telephone contacts. Dependance on others for recruitment was not a good idea.

At the first meeting the trainers were the only ones who showed up! (The meeting was set, over the protests of the trainers for 7:00 p.m. when no parent in their right mind would be out on the streets after dark) A number of problematic areas had immediately surfaced:

1) Parent contact must be on an individual basis by a powerful and respected person in the community, at least until the program gains creditability.
2) Parents need "word of mouth" along with written notification.
3) Parents will not come to a meeting after school and surely after dark.
4) Parent need child care service for pre-schoolers provided since they do not have the financial ability to provide for their own.

5) Parents who are not within walking distance of the school must have transportation.

These problems were dealt with by:

1) Enlisting the aid of some very powerful people in the community to speak directly to and promote attendance of parents.
2) Direct telephone calls followed by personal visits by people identified in number one.
3) Changing the meeting from night to school hours, right after lunch on mid-week days.
   (Also provide lunch for parents who desire it)
4) Provide child care for pre-schoolers.
5) Provide transportation to parents via carpool subsidized by Teacher Corps.

A delay of two weeks was encountered while these procedures took place. Upon the second start-up of the program, 25 parents were in attendance.

The Program

Parents were given the Becker book at the first session. Even though the book is easily read with programmed material and definitions for the harder words, many of the parents were unable to read the material.

The trainers believe they made another error at this time. A portable video tape was used in some role play situations that were designed as warm up activities. From our response to these

it would not appear to be a good idea. Putting somewhat reticient parents on stage front-center and then giving them as instant replay was not their idea of how one gains fame and notoriety. Parents are very self-conscious of their verbal skills and do not feel at ease when forced to role play a situation.

It would also appear that the trainers were not listening too closely to parents' concerns. First, parents had specific concerns they wanted to work on solving. Second, they were convinced that the punishment they used, whipping, was not working but did not know what else to do. They wanted immediate attention to these problems and were not too willing to wait while the trainers waded chapter by chapter through behavior management skills. This was most aptly demonstrated by the rapid decrease in attendance. From 25 parents who attended the first session, attendance decreased to 12 the second, seven the third and then stabilized at four (4) for the remainder of the sessions.

This deterioration in turnout caused us some grave concern, Any group first starting will have a fairly high attrition rate until the trainer's creditability is established, but this was exceedingly high. As a result, the leaders changed their tactics and started to deal in some fairly directive ways with parental concerns.

All details of reinforcement theory were written on butcher paper and taped on a wall of the meeting room so parents could see by illustration what the trainers were trying to say. Examples

of techniques which used the trainers as role players were also given. To further illustrate reinforcement techniques for good behavior, parents were given flowers and plants for bringing in specific homework assignments that dealt with particular problem behaviors they were trying to modify.

Problems the parents were having were very systematically taken apart piece by piece. Problem resolution tactics were worked out by using third person examples. That is, whenever examples of inappropriate behavior were given, parents were not singled out. A great deal of positive verbal reinforcement by the trainers was also paired with any approximation to success parents were having.

The term approximate bears some defintion here. These parents have not been raised in a milieu that could be considered positive in many ways and certainly does not allow for the social amenities that one might construe to go with a middle class method of child rearing. Emphatically, this does not mean that these parents do not have considerable resources to cope with a hostile environment. However, in particular, discipline is viewed in very singular terms. That is, if a child does something wrong, they get a "whippin" for it -- including minor infractions. To try and negate this type of disciplinary procedure would meet with extreme resistance. Parents must be led very slowly into seeing other types of disciplinary procedures as being appropriate and equally effective. Given such an approach, parents will generate alternatives that are highly creative and effective.

As a result, it is our feeling that punishment must be considered almost immediately once parents have defined what problem they wish to alleviate. It is further the trainers contention that one must not expect parents to quit "whippin" their children. The trainers would be very satisfied to get reports that parents are at least using other procedures along with "whippin" to modify their children's behavior. This may seem anathema to those more progressive students of childrearing, but it is the trainers belief that to expect anymore would be less than pragmatic and would militate heavily against any members staying with the group for more than two sessions.

It should be understood that the trainers began operating in a highly creative modality once it became apparent that a lock step procedure in teaching behavior management skills would result in termination of the group. That is, lesson plans on the Becker program were made, but they tended to go by the wayside. Because of the immediate needs of parents, lesson plans tend to be of minor importance as opposed to presenting problems that parents bring to the sessions. Thus, principles of behavior management tend to get spliced into the problems at hand and the trainers tend to teach as they go.

While it may be viewed that the trainers were "winging it" in their approach, we do not believe such is the case. We would find it much more comfortable to follow in sequential activities. However, in training inner city parents, one must be able "to think on one's feet" otherwise there is little creditability and even less attendance.

The second portion of our program in communication skills should only be approached by the most courageous of parent trainers. Parents had a good deal of trouble understanding the Dinkmeyer and McKay material. They had a great deal more trouble trying to implement it. Any attempt to use this material should be approached with a great deal of caution. If one goes slowly through the Becker material, one should proceed at a snail's pace through the Dinkmeyer and McKay material, or for that matter, through any communication skills material.

Only when parents have experienced success over the short term will they be willing to invest any time or energy in something which may appear as strange to them as Sanskrit - and that's only half the battle! Once one moves into a communication skills model, the "why" of it must be reinforced over and over. The very directive communication approaches that inner city parents use tends to be highly incongruent with the restatement and reflection components necessary to such program. Probably any approach of this type should first and foremost consider "I" or ownership statements which are more palatable to such a group.

We also do not recommend bringing children in to work on concepts such as the family planning conference, and in particular, videotaping them with parents present. This approach only breeds one upsmanship in the group and results in parents laying directive commands on their children to show the trainers how well they can behave.

What we do recommend is the trainers conducting and video taping several modeling sessions with the children, but not in the presence of parents. After taping, replays can be shown to parents and processed as models for effective communication skills.

If that is not possible, the trainers would recommend the use of modeling between trainer and child, but without the parents participating, at least not until many modeling sessions have been undertaken and such communication skills as owning and reflecting feelings have been covered in a very, very methodical manner with copious personnel illustrations by the trainer.

Finally, if work is to be done with children while parents are present, it is advisable to set role playing where trainer is asking for help with problems his own child is having in the family. These role plays can closely resemble problems the participants are having, but still allows a "safe third person" that parents will not personalize as they have a tendency to do when their own problems are brought up by their children.

Recommendations

Of twenty-five parents who started, three finished the program. This would appear to be a terrible success rate, but one attempting to undertake such a program for the first time on strange turf should not be alarmed.

What one should be concerned about is what happens to the three who did finish and receive diplomas (by the way, issuing nice diplomas is a must). That, simply stated, means what the finishers will have to say will hit the street quickly. If they talk up the program one can rest assured that more parents will stick it out the next time around. If they talk it down there would seem little way to salvage it. Satisfied parents who finish the program will give the trainer more face validity than anything else.

Anything that will give the finishers notoriety should be done. The trainers have done such things as introduce our graduates to our university classes for rap sessions, bring them before new parent groups being started to relate their successes, refer other parents to them in a peer helping capacity, give them copy space in PTA bulletins and Teacher Corps Newsletters, take their pictures and put them up on the school bulletin board, take them out for a graduation dinner and give them flowers. All of these serve not only as reinforcers, but also lets other parents know about our program. Most importantly, it lets prespective parent group candidates know who our graduates are so they can seek them out and find out if the program is worth their while.

It may thus be seen how important it is to do a good job, and have success with one's first group of parents. Parents report that they have learned successful alternative ways of dealing with their children. They are not perfect

but they do report positive results and their children's teachers also report positive changes in the classroom. Classroom data that has been collected seems to confirm this.

Of equal importance the trainers are gaining creditability in the community and the parenting program is too. There are now eight parents attending regularly in the second cycle of the program. This may not be the whole community, but it is a start.

Finally, let us consider the question first proposed. "Do the slick back packaged parenting programs really work or are they just fried chicken franchise operations that don't serve up anything but necks and wings?" With qualifications we would say "Yes!" But these qualifications are so severe that we would be more legitimate to say "No!" Only with the greatest skill and patience can one work through these programs. Frankly, we feel that if a person is knowledgeable about behavior management and communication skills, they will be better off putting their program together. That program will deal little with theory and lots with practice. It will deal little with talk and lots of action. It will deal in concrete idiosyncratic ways with "here and how" problems. It will be highly reinforcing in immediate ways that will enthuse parents to keep trying. It will be highly adaptable so that it is not dependent on serialized procedures that may have little meaning or understanding to parents who may be semi-or illiterate. It will, if these things are done, work.

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